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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and explains three needed developments for building a foundation from which knowledge unique to a profession of educational administration can emerge and thus improve school effectiveness. Each needed development is associated with a general need for a shift in the focus of scholarly attention. Researchers need to focus first on practical rather than academic matters, second, on the effect of administrators' actions on student learning, and third, on administrative problems and instances of instructional ineffectiveness. Educational administration can become equivalent to advanced professions, the paper says, by discovering subclasses of the major problem and what changes to make to resolve each subcategory of problems. The document identifies the contributions of practitioners and researchers in generating the requisite knowledge base and explores ways in which such knowledge would promote the professionalization of educational administration. (Author/LD)

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SOME NEEDED DEVELOPMENTS IN RESEARCH FOR BUILDING A "THEORY OF ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICE"

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ABSTRACT

Educational administrators lack a practical knowledge base of use to administrators in improving school effectiveness. The paper describes and explains three needed developments for building a foundation from which knowledge unique to a profession of educational administration can emerge. Each needed development is associated with a general need for a shift in the focus of scholarly attention.

The first needed development is a focus on practical rather than academic matters. Like practitioners in other applied professions, we need knowledge about how to solve a category of sociaty's problems rather than about the nature of administration. A related needed development is a focus on the effects of administrators' actions on student learning. As in other applied fields, we should use academic knowledge only to enhance practice in accomplishing the explicit purpose of schools. Finally, we need a focus on administrative problems, instances of instructional ineffectiveness. Educational administration can become equivalent to advanced professions by discovering subclasses of the major problem and what changes to make to resolve each sub-category of problems.

The contributions of practitioners and researchers in generating the requisite knowledge base are identified, and ways in which such knowledge would promote the professionalization of educational administration are explored.

SOME NEEDED DEVELOPMENTS IN RESEARCH FOR BUILDING A "THEORY OF ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICE"

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The Orientation of this Paper

I must start by confessing that I'm not at all sure what is meant by the phrase, "a theory of administrative practice," and that I suspect my interpretation of the term differs quite radically from Jack Culbertson's. Therefore, I'll opt for the presentor's traditional cop-out by defining my terms idiosyncratically and proceeding to present exactly what I want to talk about.

For purposes of this paper I'm going to define "theory of administrative practice" as a propositional statement (or set of interrelated propositions) about the results of actions performed by administrators in education. The paper is about some needed developments for building theory concerning the results of administrators actions. More specifically, the paper is about laying a foundation from which such theory or theories can emerge, not about the actual building of such theory.

The central thesis of the paper is that as educational administration is currently practiced and studied it is no more than an occupation -- a salaried job that entails knowing a few techniques and having enough "street smarts" to survive. It is an occupation, however, that aspires to professional status. And I think it should become a profession -- a field of practice in which knowledge guides actions that are directed toward the solution of a type of problems in society. In actuality this paper is about some needed developments in research for building a profession of educational administration. References will frequently be made to the mature professions such as architecture, law, engineering, and medicine for illustrative purposes.

Essentially, there are four major interrelated research developments needed to lay a foundation from which a profession can grow: 1) a systematic data base in which the patterns of relationships and the anomalies discovered are the source of theoretical thinking; 2) a multi-dimensional perspective for viewing a category of social problems in potentially useful ways and shaping the systematic data base; 3) a fair share of professional imagination for inventing solutions to the problems at hand and inventing theoretical explanations for the relationships found in the data set; and 4) a shift in the focus of administrators' and researchers' attention in our field. Because of time constraints this paper will treat only the last of these needed developments in detail: WE NEED A SHIFT IN THE FOCUS OF OUR ATTENTION.

Needed Developments Associated with an Appropriate Focus of Attention

Our field has been criticized for, among other things, a diffusion of scholarly interests such that cumulative knowledge is scarcely feasible. As Erickson noted recently, with researchers pursuing so many different avenues of inquiry, there is little "conceptual unity," little chance for a body of knowledge to grow to impressive or highly reliable proportions.[1] Thus, the purpose of this section of the paper is to identify, through successively narrowing the field of our attention, a focal point toward which intensive effort should be directed if our interest is in laying the foundation for building a profession of educational administration. Three needed research developments associated with identifying an appropriate focus of attention are described.

1. We need a focus on practical rather than academic matters.

The distinction I want to make here is that between studying a phenomenon from the perspective of an academic discipline -- as an astronomer would study stars, for

example, in order to understand what they are and how they behave -- and studying a class of problems from the perspective of an applied profession -- as an architect would study materials, for example, to understand their properties in order to manipulate them effectively. This distinction can perhaps best be clarified with reference to issues that are not explored in other professions: people preparing for careers in engineering, for example, do not learn about engineers' styles of behaving, though engineers surely do behave; they do not learn about how engineers make decisions or about the decision-making process, though engineers certainly do make decisions; in brief, they do not study themselves and each other. The focus of their attention is outside themselves, on the properties of the materials with which they work and the forces affecting those materials. More to the point, they learn applications of this knowledge to the solution of practical, real, concrete, almost tangible problems. Equivalent statements can be made of the other advanced professions: the focus of attention is not on the practitioners but on the materials outside themselves that can be manipulated to solve problems in the "real world."

In educational administration, by contrast, our focus of attention has been on the administrators (or organizations) themselves, as if they were stars, phenomena of detached interest to be understood and explained for the sake of satisfying intellectual curiosity of building an academic discipline. In educational administration we've been contemplating our own navels!

If our interest is in laying the foundation for building a profession, the focus of our attention should be on the nature of the problems that are to be solved, those elements that can be manipulated in order to solve the problems, and the results of various manipulations with respect to problem solutions. Stated differently, our focus should not be

on how or why administrators behave but on what they do that is directed toward problem solutions and what effects their actions have on resolving problem situations.

2. We need a focus on the effects of administrative actions on student learning.

The advancement of learning on the part of students is the overt, explicit social purpose of schools, just as the erection of functional structures is the overt purpose of architecture firms and the curing of patients the overt purpose of hospitals. Whether architecture firms and architects, or hospitals and physicians, have other types of social impact as well -- as they surely do! -- those types of impact are not relevant to scholarly inquiry within those professions. Only the means of accomplishing the explicit purposes of the profession are deemed appropriate foci of professional inquiry.

By analogy, whether schools accomplish social ends other than advancing student learning -- such as pupil control or social stratification or construction or social reality or teacher satisfaction -- is of interest from a practical point of view only to the extent that these outcomes are subject to intentional control and to the extent that they affect student learning.

Now, if a political scientist wants to test a theory about the dynamics of power as it occurs in school systems, that's all well and good for building a knowledge base in the discipline of political science; however, it is not an appropriate focus for inquiry in a profession of educational administration. Similarly, if one wants to examine patterns of congruence between leader personality and group situation in relation to group effectiveness by studying schools, that's fine for producing knowledge (validating theory) in the academic discipline of social psychology; but again, it is not helping to build a knowledge base in a profession of educational administration.

What is pertinent to a profession of educational administration is student learning,

or, more precisely, what administrators intentionally do to improve student learning and what effects their intentional actions have on student learning. I know that educational administrators don't often pay attention to this issue directly. Behavioral science (academic) research indicates that they spend scarcely any time at all observing instruction, gathering data, or exercising "instructional leadership" of any kind.[2] Nevertheless, if the purpose of schools is to educate, then administrators should be directing the major part of their activity to seeing to it that effective education -- continually more effective education -- is occurring. All other activities and involvements are or should be subsidiary. That is, knowledge about the law, the budget, the community structure and such is only important because these factors set the limits on what administrators can do (to what degree they can manipulate the elements of the instructional situation) in their efforts to improve instruction. Similarly, all the little How To techniques -- how to schedule classes, prepare a budget, design a staff development program, conduct teacher evaluations and the like -- are only important to the extent that they facilitate the improvement of student learning.

3. We need a focus on problems in student learning: instances of instructional ineffectiveness.

As noted earlier, each profession is defined by an unique class of social problems to be resolved: people needing an edifice in which to perform specified social functions; people needing a machine to perform certain tasks; people needing redress for injustices they've suffered; people needing cures for maladies that interfere with their functioning. Each class of social problems defines a profession, and the knowledge base within each profession encompasses: configurations of sub-classes of problems within the broad, defining category; properties of materials (or factors) that can be modified or utilized

to solve that sub-class of problems; records of past manipulations of those materials (or factors); and the results obtained from manipulations with respect to each sub-class of problems. Obviously, the practitioners in an applied profession agree on what the broad category of social problems to be solved is. And, as Hills noted, the practitioners within a profession have a common value orientation: they recognize instances of the problem when they encounter it and they want to resolve each case.[3]

It has been suggested that a focus of scholarly inquiry in our field should be on what problems administrators encounter[4] or on how administrators "find" or define problems.[5] But these foci would be no more helpful in building a professional knowledge base than equivalent inquiries would be in the mature professions, for what the practitioners individually perceive as "problems" are events that make them personally uncomfortable or threaten their security -- clients not paying their bills, political machinations in the professional organization, recalcitrant employees, public interference, and the like. No, these aren't appropriate avenues of inquiry for a profession. The focus of attention must be on that category of problems that all agree upon as representing society's needs.

In education generally and educational administration specifically we have a category of problems that represents society's need for knowledgeable and skilled people able to function in an extremely complex environment. All instances in which such a social need is not fulfilled or not adequately fulfilled are problem cases deserving, if not demanding, the attention of the professional. Where we've run into a difficulty that has hindered our development as a profession is in our failure to agree on what adequate education is and on what we should regard as evidence that inadequate education is occurring.

Without digressing into such major issues as what the curriculum content should

be, how the curriculum should be structured, the desirability of mastery learning programs, and the problems of test reliability and validity, I offer Bloom's theory of school learning[6] as suggesting a useful and relatively practical starting point for problem recognition. Bloom asserted that all but about two per cent of the student population is able to master the average school curriculum under the proper circumstances.[7] Presupposing a structured curriculum and a valid testing program, then, a problem of instructional ineffectiveness would be apparent whenever significantly more than two per cent of the students -- or of any identifiable segment of the student population within a school (e.g., by subject area, by grade, by class, by sex, by race, etc.) -- fails to master the curriculum (where mastery itself has a specified criterion).

Let's assume we can agree that an instance of the general problem (instructional ineffectiveness) exists whenever a given proportion of a student group fails to master the curriculum. If educational administration were a profession, as I believe it should become, each instance of instructional ineffectiveness so defined would be a call to administrative action. This action would occur in the following sequence. The administrator would: 1) gather data about the nature of the instructional situation in each individual case of ineffectiveness; 2) ponder the data in an effort to discern the causes of ineffectiveness in each case; 3) generate an hypothesis as to the nature of each problem case and a possible solution; 4) implement the "solution" on an experimental basis; 5) gather follow-up data on student achievement to determine whether the "solution" appears to have had the desired effect; and, most importantly, 6) maintain careful records of the findings at every stage of this sequence.

Were this procedure to be followed by large numbers of administrators, it would become possible for a data base to evolve from which genuinely useful knowledge could

generated for the foundation of a true profession of educational administration. More specifically, a data set based upon such procedures would enable the identification of sub-classes of problems within the broad category of instructional ineffectiveness. It would enable discovery of which attempted solutions "work" and under what circumstances. It would enable clarification of the nature (properties) of the factors that are subject to intentional manipulation. Finally, it would enable the discovery of patterns of relationships and anomalous relationships among variables that would ultimately spawn theories uniquely relevant to educational administration. Over time, as this body of information would accumulate and become increasingly refined, educational administrators would be able to act on the basis of knowledge in resolving problems of instructional ineffectiveness. They would become true professionals in an applied field.

Toward an Applied Profession

Early in this paper I noted that there are four interrelated research developments that are needed to lay the foundation for building a profession. The relationships between three of them and the one described here can now be clarified.

The needed developments treated in some detail in this paper are all associated with a shift in the focus of our attention to a more appropriate domain than we now investigate. Specifically, the needed developments discussed here are a focus on practical rather than academic matters, a focus on the effects of administrators' actions on student learning,[6] and a focus particularly on the problem area of ineffective instruction. It should be apparent at this point that the need for a systematic data base is associated with the records administrators would keep of their efforts to resolve cases of instructional ineffectiveness. The need for a multi-dimensional perspective is associated with identifying the types of information administrators would gather in their efforts to define

or characterize cases of ineffective instruction. And the need for professional imagination is associated both with the creative problem-defining process administrators would undertake and with the creative theorizing researchers would undertake as a result of their examinations of the data.

Would we then have a profession of educational administration, after all this experimentation, record keeping, and analysis is under way? No. We'd simply have a lot of very busy people handling a lot of data! Not until we glean understanding about how types of cases of instructional ineffectiveness are actually solved, and until this knowledge is disseminated throughout the field so that it informs administrative action, and until it shapes our preparation programs will our field be a profession. Not until educational administrators know the configurations of particular problem cases (with all the theory-related understanding this implies), and the properties of the situational factors they can modify, and the results of particular administrative actions in a large number of problem-solving experiments will they truly be professionals. At that time educational administration will be in league with the other mature professions, and its practitioners will know that they are actively contributing to solving society's ills.

NOTES

1. Donald A. Erickson. Research in Educational Administration: The State of the Art. Invited Address, American Educational Research Association, Annual Meeting, Toronto, Canada, March, 1978.

2.

3. Jean Hills. Preparation for Practice in Educational Administration: The State of the Art. Study Prospectus. University of British Columbia, Centre for the Study of Administration in Education, October, 1977.

4. Ibid.

5. J. W. Getzels. Alternative Directions for Research in Educational Administration. Discussion Topic, Conducted at the Fourth International Intervisitation Programme, University of British Columbia, May, 1978 (paper not available for quotation).

6. Benjamin S. Bloom. Human Characteristics and School Learning. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976.

7. Ibid., p. 215.

8. This focus is akin to Erickson's (op. cit.) recommended focus on "school effects." It differs from the general class of "school effects," however, in that it is limited to effects that are associated with administrators' intentional efforts to improve instruction (learning outcomes).